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Historical Information

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Before looking ahead, you must look behind.

Our history is full of many accomplishments in spite of extraordinary challenges.

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1890's

1891 - Federal Prison System Established

Congress passes the "Three Prisons Act," which established the Federal Prison System (FPS). The first three prisons – USP Leavenworth, USP Atlanta, and USP McNeil Island – are operated with limited oversight by the Department of Justice.

1930's

1930 - Federal Bureau of Prisons is Established

Several things contributed to the establishment of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. During the 1920's, Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt was responsible for creating institutions for younger offenders (Federal Reformatory, Chillicothe) and for women (Federal Reformatory, Alderson). Recognizing the need for centralized administration and standardized regulations, Ms. Willebrandt pushed for the establishment of a new DOJ agency to oversee the FPS. In 1928, James V. Bennett (later to become the BOP's second Director) of the Bureau of Efficiency also conducted a study of the FPS that highlighted its problems, including overcrowding and the lack of meaningful inmate programs.

1930 - First BOP Director

In 1930, Sanford Bates becomes the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1932 - First BOP Penitentiary

USP Lewisburg opens, becoming the first penitentiary built by the BOP. It featured an original design that incorporated many new correctional concepts (e.g., housing for different security levels in the same institution).

1933 - First BOP Medical Facility

MCFP Springfield opens, becoming the Bureau's first medical facility and marking the beginning of the BOP's long-standing working partnership with the U.S. Public Health Service.

1940's

1934 - Federal Prison Industries Established

Federal Prison Industries (FPI) – more commonly known by its trade name UNICOR – was established by Congress on June 23, 1934, as a wholly owned government corporation. From the outset, FPI has been an important correctional program that focuses on helping offenders acquire the work skills necessary to successfully make the transition from prison to law-abiding, contributing members of society.

1934 - First BOP maximum security prison

The first maximum security prison, USP Alcatraz, opens housing the most violent, disruptive, and escape-prone inmates in the Federal system. USP Alcatraz was the precursor to USP Marion and ADX Florence, as well as the many maximum security prisons now operated nationwide.

1937 - Second BOP Director

In 1937, James V. Bennett becomes the second Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1940 - Development of Modern BOP Practices

The BOP nearly doubled in size, from 14,115 inmates and 14 institutions in 1930, to 24,360 inmates and 24 institutions in 1940. Inmate classification and the development of security levels (e.g. camps, FCIs, and penitentiaries) became standard practice and led to more efficient and cost-effective operations.

Much of this can be attributed to Alderson Warden Mary Belle Harris (1927-1941) who was a pioneer in unit management, programming, classification, and decentralized housing units (from massive cellblocks to a central campus layout). Today, these concepts are standard practice in the BOP.

1950's

1950 - Key Legislation Passed

Director, James V. Bennett (1937-1964) expanded many of the BOP's original goals by influencing major legislation. With the amendment to the Youth Corrections Act, new options for rehabilitation and treatment were made available to juvenile delinquents. Later, the Prisoner Rehabilitation Act would be passed, enabling work release programs to be established.

1959 - "Medical Model" Gained Traction

In the late 1950's and into the 1960's, the "Medical Model" became the predominant theory in corrections. At this time, criminal behavior was viewed as a disease that could be cured through a variety of rehabilitative programs, many of which the BOP pioneered. The inmate classification system was used to "diagnose" an inmate; counseling and education programs were provided to treat and "cure" the inmate of criminal behavior.

1960's

1960 - Inmate Population Growth

By 1960, there were 25,853 inmates in 36 institutions.

1964 - Third BOP Director

In 1964, Myrl E. Alexander becomes the third Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1970's

1969 - Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center

In 1969, the Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center opened, replacing the Chillicothe Reformatory and the National Training School for Boys. The center implemented new concepts in unit management and treatment programs and was noted at the time for its innovative architecture. Today, the Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center is now FCI Morgantown.

1970 - Fourth BOP Director

In 1970, Norman A. Carlson becomes the fourth Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1970 - Reduction in Inmate Population

In 1970, there were still 36 institutions, however, the Bureau experienced a slight decrease in the population to 21,266 total federal inmates.

1971 - "Balanced Model" Gained Traction

In the early 1970's, it was becoming apparent that the "Medical Model" was ineffective. In response, the BOP adopted a "Balanced Model" of corrections. This philosophy, which still guides the BOP today, recognized that punishment, deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation are all goals of the prison system.

1973 - First BOP Regional Office

The continued growth of the BOP prompted the agency to decentralize its operations, creating regional offices to improve management of its widely scattered facilities. The first regional office, South Central, opened in 1973. The following year, offices for North Central, Northeast, Southeast, and Western regions were opened. The last of the six total regional offices, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, would later open in 1990.

1974 - National Institute of Corrections Established

In 1974, the National Institute of Corrections was established to provide technical assistance to State and local corrections agencies, law enforcement, parole/probation and judicial staff; conduct research on corrections issues; maintain a corrections information center; and develop national correctional goals and standards.

1980's

1980 - Inmate Growth Remained Steady

The BOP's inmate population was 24,252, holding steady from 40 years earlier.

1984 - Substantial Inmate Population Growth

Enactment of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 (which created many new Federal crimes, abolished parole, reinstituted the Federal death penalty, and established sentencing guidelines) led to substantial increases in the BOP's inmate population.

1987 - Fifth BOP Director

In 1987, J. Michael Quinlan becomes the fifth Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1990's

1987 - Atlanta/Oakdale Disturbances

Under Director Quinlan's leadership, the BOP successfully resolved the Atlanta/Oakdale disturbances in 1987.

1990 - Inmate Growth Remained High

By 1990, the BOP's total inmate population had reached 65,347 and grew to 66 institutions.

1991 - Talladega Disturbance

Under Director Quinlan's leadership, the BOP successfully resolved the Talladega disturbance in 1991.

1992 - Sixth BOP Director

In 1992, Kathleen Hawk Sawyer becomes the sixth - and first female - Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

1994 - Key Legislation Passed

In 1994, the Violent Crime Conduct & Law Enforcement Act was passed. When it was later implemented, it would prove to have a substantial impact on agency operations, specifically in the reduction of sentence for inmates participating in drug treatment programs.

1997 - BOP Absorbs DC Inmates

Enactment of the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act of 1997 required the BOP's absorption of the entire DC felony population.

2000's

2000 - Inmate Population More Than Doubles

By the end of 2000, the BOP's total inmate population had jumped to 145,125.

2001 - Federal Executions Resumed

In 2001, Federal executions resumed with the execution of Timothy McVeigh, the first execution since 1963 and the first held at the new Special Confinement Unit (Death Row) built at USP Terre Haute, IN.

2002 - Life Connections Program Established

The Life Connections Program (LCP) – the BOP's first residential multi-faith-based program – was established in 2002, to facilitate personal transformation and help reduce recidivism. It now operates at FCI Milan; USP Leavenworth; the FMC Carswell; and FCCs Petersburg and Terre Haute.

2003 - Seventh BOP Director

In 2003, Harley G. Lappin becomes the seventh Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

2010's

2003 - Legislation With Long Term Impacts

In recent years, several important statutes were enacted which have substantial long-term impact on the BOP including the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2003; and later, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 and the Second Chance Act of 2008. In addition, recent legislation has also gradually chipped away at UNICOR's mandatory source status.

2004 - Major Cost Reduction Initiatives

As a by-product of the war on terrorism, the government shifted budget resources to homeland security and counter-terrorism and reduced spending in traditional criminal justice areas. Significant budget limitations necessitated an accelerated critical review of every aspect of BOP operations and the implementation of several cost-reduction initiatives. These efforts included centralizing and automating human resource functions; consolidating and centralizing sentence computation and inmate designation functions; and the closure of the Intensive Confinement Center programs (at Bryan, Lewisburg, and Lompoc) and four stand-alone camps (Allenwood, Seymour Johnson, Nellis, and Eglin).

2006 - Combating Terrorism

Following 9/11, in support of the Department of Justice and the nation in the war on terrorism, the BOP adopted its 7th strategic planning national goal – counter-terrorism. It adopted numerous strategies and procedures in support of this goal. In October 2006, the Bureau activated the Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) to assist in identifying inmates involved in terrorist activities and provide for the coordination of translation services and analysis of terrorist inmate communications. In December 2006, the BOP established the Communications Management Unit (CMU) at FCC Terre Haute, IN. This facility houses inmates who, due to their current offense, conduct, or other verified information require increased monitoring of communications with persons in the community to ensure the safe, secure, and orderly running of BOP facilities and to protect the public.

2008 - First Special Management Unit Facility

In FY08, USP Lewisburg was designated to serve in its entirety, as a Special Management Unit (SMU) institution to operate as a more controlled and restrictive environment for managing the most aggressive and disruptive inmates from BOP USP general populations. SMUs were subsequently established at FCC Oakdale and FCI Talladega as well.

2011 - Eighth BOP Director

In 2011, Charles E. Samuels, Jr. became the eighth Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

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